SURELY YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN PREDESTINATION, DO YOU?
WHO DECIDES WHO GETS IN? WHO'S REALLY IN CHARGE HERE?
October 11, 2009

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Psalm 139:1–12
Romans 8:28–30

"Those whom he predestined he also called;
and those whom he called he also justified;
and those whom he justified he also glorified."
Romans 8:30 (NRSV)

Before we were, God was:
God thought of us and called us into being;
God knows us by name;
God has chosen to give us a future and a hope.
God does not merely create us and leave us to our own devices;
rather, God has a special place for us in God's very own heart.

William Stacy Johnson
John Calvin: Reformer for the Twenty-First Century

Hast thou not seen
How thy desires e'er have been
Granted in what he ordaineth?

Joachim Neander, 1680

In Robert Olmstead's fine novel *Coal Black Horse,* fourteen-year-old Robey Childs is sent by his mother, from their small farm in the hills of Virginia, to find his father, who is serving in the Confederate Army, and bring him home. Robey rides north, for weeks, following the fighting and finally comes to a small town in Pennsylvania, just over the Maryland border, where there has been a huge battle. His incredible adventures on his journey have transformed him from a sheltered innocent to a young man. But then he catches up with the Confederate Army at Gettysburg, a day or so after the battle, and he sees sights so brutal, so terrible that, he is shaken to his core —a field literally filled with dead men. He finds his wounded father, but walking through the field, looking for water and food—the battlefield strewn with the bodies of the dead and dying—he comes upon a horribly wounded and blinded soldier who asks him for water and who dies in front of his

eyes. Robert Olmstead says, “He came to understand that he was finally finished with his believing in God” (p. 135).

At the young age of fourteen, Robey Childs confronts the elemental, fundamental, theological dilemma, a dilemma that every human being sooner or later confronts and in some way resolves: the matter of the existence of God and the reality of human suffering and evil.

On the basis of what he has now seen with his own eyes—the appalling suffering and death he has witnessed—Robey comes to a critical, existential moment and makes a huge decision: “I’m done with God; I’m finished with believing in God.”

He has been taught and he assumes, as most people do or seem to, that God is in charge, that God is either responsible for what he is seeing—that this carnage, all these deaths, all this miserable suffering is somehow the will of God—or else God is powerless to do anything about it. In either case, he’s finished with it.

And so we come this morning to deep water theologically, spiritually, to a much misunderstood doctrine, with which Presbyterians and our founder, John Calvin, are identified: namely, predestination.

This year marks the 500th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth. Born in Noyon, France, in 1509, he studied law and was attracted to the reforming ideas coming from Germany and the writings of Martin Luther. When those ideas fell out of favor with the king of France and when scholars and reform-minded clergy began to be persecuted, Calvin fled, broke with Rome, and ended up in Geneva, Switzerland. There—with the exception of a several-year period when he was thrown out by the city council for meddling in politics—there in Geneva, John Calvin spent the rest of his life studying, lecturing, inventing a new organizational model of the church, one based not on the authority of the hierarchy but on the God-given rights to the individual, and because of what he believed about religious faith, he threw himself into the social and political life of Geneva, for better or worse . . . and it was some of each. Along the way he wrote a scholarly, masterful, and huge exposition of Christianity called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He was brilliant, everyone knew that. Every scholar, prince, priest in Europe knew about him and read him. One of his biographers says Calvin felt as if he had never met his intellectual equal and was probably right. He was also stubborn, opinionated, sometimes arrogant, and when challenged, capable of passionate conflict with opponents, conflict bordering on hatred. John Calvin is one of the most important personalities and thinkers standing between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. His thinking and writing have profoundly influenced the way Western civilizations has come to think about the

political process, human rights, about economics, and about the basic political idea that human beings are created free and responsible for their own destinies.

On July 10, the actual date of his birth, there was a huge and colorful celebration in Geneva at the Cathedral of St. Pierre, where he preached and taught. One of the speakers was Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey, who said, "Geneva's international impact owes much to John Calvin. . . . Calvin had striven to make Geneva a model for a 'new world'" and linked him to the emergence of political freedom." (*World Alliance of Reformed Churches Update,* Sept 2009)

But what John Calvin, and Presbyterians are most associated with is his idea of predestination, a much-maligned and misunderstood idea. Actually, it did not originate with Calvin. Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine in the fourth century wrote about it, and all of them trace it to St. Paul, who first used the word *predestination* in his letter to the Romans, where he discusses God's amazing grace: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God . . . those whom he predestined" (8:28, 30). You may conclude that Calvin ultimately got it wrong, but he was in very good company.

First, what predestination is not. It is not fatalism or determinism—the notion that God not only has a plan for every one of us but our lives are simply a playing out of the script God has written, that history itself is merely the gradual revelation of God's will and plan; God is in charge and in control. Those ideas are widespread; we encounter them all the time in ways that are both sophisticated and ordinary: "When your number is up, it's up." "The bullet that killed him had his name on it." "Que sera sera," "whatever happens will happen." Sometimes we say to the grieving, attempting to be comforting, "God's will is hard to understand," as if God willed the death of a dear one. There is an old and favorite story about the Scottish minister whose idea of predestination was actually fatalism and who upon climbing the steep stairs to his pulpit one Sunday tripped on his robe and fell all the way down. He got up, brushed himself off, regained his composure, and said, "I'm happy I've got that behind me." What most people mean by predestination is that whatever happens is God's will. And yet sooner or later everyone understands that fatalism is incompatible with the idea of a loving and merciful and just God, and many people, just like Robey Childs, stunned by the brutal violence and massive suffering and death on the battlefield at Gettysburg, conclude that there is no God.

A sophisticated form of fatalism or scientific determinism was advanced not long ago in an influential book by B.F. Skinner, a behavioral psychologist, in his best-seller, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity.* Skinner said that "all human behavior is controlled by genetic and environmental factors." We're

predestined by our D.N.A. Skinner's ideas rule out freedom of will. Freedom of will is, Skinner said, an idea that hinders scientific analysis of human behavior.

Why did Calvin come up with the idea of predestination? Princeton theologian William Stacey Johnson says that for John Calvin, predestination was an answer to life's most vexing questions: "Why was I born as this particular person? What is my purpose in life? . . . Why have I become who I am? And what am I supposed to do?" (See William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the Twenty-First Century,* pp. 42–43). One answer is B. F. Skinner's: it's all about genetics and environment. Another answer is that "it's all random. . . . There is no meaning or purpose. Our lives are a biological accident. Once we pass on our DNA, our lives and deaths make little difference to the species, the ecosphere, the cosmos."

"Calvinism," Johnson says, "offers a different answer. . . . Who we are—our gifts and our calling—resides deep within the intentionality of God. . . . Before we were, God was. God thought of us and called us into being. God knows us by name." Predestination means that not only does God know us by name, but that God has made a decision about us—to accept us, love us, to come find us, work in and through our lives to redeem us. God has made provision for our salvation.

Calvin was absolutely convinced that God was absolutely sovereign and that our standing with God is based not on our own moral behavior—about which he was a realist, somewhat of a pessimist—and not on the church's rules and rituals. Our standing with God is based solely on God's goodness and grace—not upon our decision to believe or be faithful but on God's decision to love us.

Calvin meant predestination to be a source of joy and comfort and courage. Ultimate decisions about us have already been made by God; ultimate matters have been resolved. We are free to live gratefully, joyfully, courageously all the days of our lives.

I wish he had stopped right there. But he didn't—maybe because he was a lawyer. His logic drove him on to what he thought was a perfectly reasonable conclusion. Obviously a lot of people are not leading joyful, grateful, faithful lives. So God must have made a different decision about them. They are the unchosen, the losers, the outsiders, the reprobates, he called them. They are, by God's eternal decree, the eternally damned, and there isn't a thing they can do about it. Calvin and B.F. Skinner would have agreed on that. It's called double predestination. It is an appalling idea, and I wish Calvin would have stopped while he was ahead, but he didn't. And, by the way, your Presbyterian church doesn't believe that any more.

Many of Calvin's contemporaries and best friends thought he went overboard and disagreed with him. They understood that double predestination seems to pull the rug out from any notion of moral responsibility: why bother being and doing good if it doesn't matter in the final analysis? It also divides the human race between the chosen and the unchosen, who suddenly become less important and therefore disposable. If Native Americans are damned anyway, what does it matter if they are eliminated (which was what some early American Calvinists, the Puritans, believed and said)?. Same for Africans—pagans, obviously not in, so what does it matter if they are captured, bought, and sold as slaves? And finally, even his contemporaries, Heinrich Bullinger and Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich, understood that the idea that God decides to save some and damn most violates the basic notion of fairness and justice. One commentator says, "It doesn't do much for God's image."

However, Professor Johnson makes the interesting observation that while double predestination is an obnoxious theological idea, it is, in fact, true in secular society. People in our world are "predestined: some to enjoy easy lives of affluence and personal ease, while others are predestined to lives of poverty, violence, and hopelessness" (p. 48). At the moment of our birth, some experience a resounding "yes" (most of us here today) and some a resounding "no." I read that paragraph on the day President Obama sent Attorney General Eric Holder and Education Secretary Arne Duncan to Chicago in the aftermath of the beating death of Fenger High School student Derrion Albert. We know the senseless tragedy of this particular predestination. We are learning that there is a direct link in brain development between violence in childhood and adult violence: that children who are victims of violence, who witness violence everyday, are not only at risk, but if they survive are almost destined to become violent. We know if a third grader has not yet learned to read, he or she is predestined to a life of successive failures and, in all likelihood, headed toward jail. We know that without caring, responsible adults and adequate childcare and education, children are, in fact, predestined to failure, violence, and tragedy. I was a supporter of the Chicago's Olympic bid and disappointed that we lost. But I do think we might now translate some of the cheery optimism about our city, some of the enormous amount of money we promised to raise, into a new Olympics for our children, into an all-out assault on the deplorable education, schools, housing, lack of accessible health care, and the violent environment in which so many Chicago children come to adulthood if they aren't murdered first. Calvin, with his strong sense of community responsibility for all citizens, particularly its most vulnerable, would approve.

In the final analysis, it's Paul's fault. He started it. He first used the word. He was a prisoner, on his way to Rome for trial and, he knew, in all probability execution. He was, I think, looking back on his own amazing life:

the adventures; the travels around the entire Roman Empire; the churches he had founded in Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia; the friends he had made; the battles fought; the persecution endured; back to the day he was knocked off his horse with the vision of Jesus Christ calling him to faith and discipleship. He was, I think, looking back over his life, the mystery of it, and realizing that God had been there all along—loving him, guiding, leading, prodding, even knocking him off his horse, if that's what it took to get his attention. God, Paul concluded, for some reason had made a decision to love him, to be with him, to name him and claim him, and God would be with him to the end of his life and beyond. He was destined to be God's man forever. And so he wrote, on the way to his own death, "We know that all things work for good for those who love God . . . those whom he predestined." And he wrote, "I am convinced that nothing, not even death, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It was a radically expansive idea of God and God's love. In Jesus Christ, Paul wrote in another letter, God revealed "a plan to gather up all things in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). Did we hear that right? God intends to gather up all things—including people, I assume—in heaven and earth? All? Everyone? Not just Jews, Gentiles, Catholics, Protestants? Not just Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, but all—all of us—gathered up in the embrace of this amazing God.

The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth, a Calvinist, said Calvin, in his doctrine of predestination, didn't pay enough attention to Jesus, who never rejected anyone. When someone accused Barth of "universalism"—the idea that God loves and will finally save all of us—Barth responded, "You believe the Bible? Fine. Then believe the verse too." Christ died not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world. "If you are worried about universalism, you had better begin worrying about the Bible" (Lewis Smedes, *My God and I,* pp. 99-100)

A distinguished New Testament scholar, John Knox took a deep breath and wrote, "All will inevitably be rescued: all resistance to God's reclaiming purpose will ultimately be overcome. God's love will finally have its way throughout the whole created universe." In our personal lives—and in the grand sweep of history—God is a presence: not controlling, dictating, but working for good, a light in the darkness. God's love will have its way (*Life in Christ Jesus,* pp. 111–118).

That is a love so big it makes me uncomfortable. The history of religion is, in one way, the story of humans watering down that love, attaching conditions to it, saying God can't love that much, redrawing the line between chosen and unchosen, insider and outsider, that Paul insisted God had erased in Jesus Christ. I don't know what God is going to do with Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot and all the great evildoers in history. I can't bring myself to

conclude that what they did and how you and I live our lives doesn't matter ultimately. I'm glad God has to sort that out and so I don't have to worry about it. I do know that if Paul was right—and with everything in me I believe he was, that in Jesus Christ God is gathering all things and all people into God's embrace—it is the very best news in the world and that instead of worrying about who's in and who's out, instead of making up lists of things you must follow or beliefs you must believe in order to persuade God to love and save you, instead of attaching conditions to God's love and excluding everyone who doesn't agree with me or believe what I believe, I ought to be spending the rest of my days thanking God for the incredible gift of God's love and living in the gloriously joyful freedom that is the result.

It is personal finally, this whole matter is. We Presbyterians are the last people in the world to talk about our personal religious experience, to boast or brag, to "testify," our evangelical friends call it. But looking back, can you not see the subtle, gentle, sometimes not-so-gentle presence of God in your personal history, the hand of God in your own life? Psychologist Gerald May describes his return to faith as a "mystical courtship" God was conducting with him. Similarly, Kathleen Norris reflects, "I came to understand that God hadn't lost me, even if for years I seemed to have misplaced God" (*Amazing Grace,* p. 104).

Can you open your mind to an idea that expansive? Can you open your heart to a love that big? Can you open your life to the courage and responsible faithfulness that is your destiny, that God intends for you, for which you are predestined?

My favorite hymn is "Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty," which we sing this morning. And my favorite phrase in that hymn, which frankly stops me in my tracks every time I sing it, is

> Hast thou not seen
> How thy desires e'er have been
> Granted in what
> He ordaineth?

That is my personal testimony.

God made a decision about me, about you, long ago.

God knows your name and has decided to be with you all the days of your life and beyond.

God is your destiny. You are safe and free.

God has decided to love you forever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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